DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 380 235 PS 023 140

AUTHOR Lambert, Beverley
TITLE Beating Burnout: A Multi-Dimensional Perspective.
INSTITUTION Australian Early Childhood Association, Inc., Watson.
REPORT NO ISSN-1320-2170
PUB DATE Jun 94
NOTE 21p.
AVAILABLE FROM Australian Early Childhood Association, P.O. Box 105, Watson, Australian Capital Territory 2602, Australia.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT AECA Resource Book Series; v1 n2 Jun 1994

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Burnout; Change Strategies; Child Caregivers; *Day Care Centers; Depression (Psychology); Early Childhood Education; Employee Attitudes; Foreign Countries; *Preschool Teachers; Professional Development; *Professional Recognition; Teacher Attitudes; *Work Environment
IDENTIFIERS Australia

ABSTRACT

A number of environmental influences--social, cultural, political, economic, and personal--work against the development of sustained professional practice and a professional self-image in qualified staff in early child care centersin Australia. These influences derive from the low professional status of child care workers, the physical and emotional intensity of child care work, poor salaries and opportunities for career advancement, and conflicting social ideologies about child care work. Burnout, a form of psychological or physical exhaustion that occurs frequently in human service occupations, is generally a three-stage process that starts with self-doubt and blame, becomes growing disillusionment with work and life in general, and culminates in complete physical and emotional exhaustion. Burnout is a multi-dimensional problem and should be viewed as a process and not a product, to avoid oversimplifying the concept and providing ineffective "quick fixes." Using a multidimensional approach rather than a one-dimensional approach to identify some likely causes and constructive ways of combatting burnout should focus on the following areas: administration and management; staff well-being; staff-child and staff-parent relationships; and program quality. Burnout is a process that can be prevented in early childhood centers by developing a multi-dimensional approach that can contribute to a positive work environment. Contains 10 references. (BAC)

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ED 380 235

AECA Resource Book Series
Volume 1 – Number 2 June 1994

Beating Burnout

A multi-dimensional perspective

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Beating Burnout

A multi-dimensional perspective

by Beverley Lambert

Contents

Feeling like a professional	3
What is burnout?	4
The multi-dimensional nature of burnout	5
When someone experiences burnout	6
Using a multi-dimensional approach to identify some likely causes of burnout	8
Using a multi-dimensional approach to identify constructiveways of combating burnout	11

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Photographs: Beverley Lambert

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the Children's Centre, Charles Sturt University, Riverina. Staff: Dimity Cowley, Janine Parsons & Felicity Cleary. Children: Jeremy Entwistle, Tabitha Wilson, Sam Leonard & Jessica Wilson. Thanks also to the Amy Hurd Child Care Centre, Kooringal (Wagga Wagga). Staff: Lesley Kirkpatrick & Kate Ryan.

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ISSN 1320-2170

Beating Burnout: A multi-dimensional perspective

In Australia the early childhood field is slowly and intentionally moving towards greater public recognition of its professional role. Recent developments all attest to the ability of the field to more actively demonstrate and assert the professional nature of its practice, as well as the distinctive principles and philosophies upon which this practice is based. Such developments include:

- the Code of Ethics (Australian Early Childhood Association, 1991);
- the beginnings of award restructuring which occurred in the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory in 1990, creating the possibility of an articulated career structure elsewhere in the field (Henderson, 1990; Laing, 1990); and
- the development of a national accreditation system for children's services in long day care (developed and to be monitored by the early childhood field itself).

Feeling like a professional

Unfortunately, 'feeling' like a professional is extremely difficult for qualified staff who work in early childhood centres. There are a number of environmental influences which actually work against the development of sustained professional practice *and* a professional self image. These influences are:

- social
- cultural
- political
- economic
- personal

They are manifested in attitudes and situations such as:

- feelings held by the public about a job which merely involves 'playing with kids all day';
- child care personnel who, considering the physical and emotional intensity of their work, undertake daily work shifts which are probably too long;
- poor salaries and few opportunities for career advancement; and
- conflict caused by the unique complexity of 'professionalism' in a field where the professional image is caught up with traditional and contemporary images of child rearing and the role of women in society. Resolving these conflicting ideologies is also difficult for institutional bureaucracies making decisions about the status of the early childhood field. Scutt notes the problems experienced by the Industrial Relations Commission in determining salary levels for early childhood personnel. "On the one hand there is an

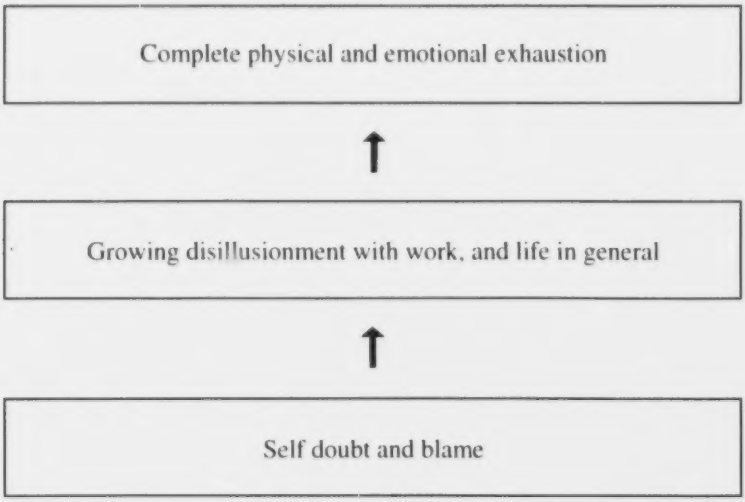
acceptance that caring for children is 'the most important job a woman can do'. On the other hand, child care—whether by mothers in the home or child care workers and teachers of young children in the public sphere—is downgraded ... The work carried out in fields traditionally dominated by female workers has caused more problems for the Commission than has the valuing of work traditionally carried out by men" (Scutt, 1992: p.38).

When these kinds of inconsistencies occur and the workplace also happens to be one where intense and continuous demands are being made on peoples' mental, physical and emotional reserves, a mismatch occurs between workers' professional expectations and the daily realities of their job. This dislocation can become of paramount significance and cause a lot of stress for employees. Over a period of time it can result in burnout or some other form of work related stress.

What is burnout?

Burnout is a form of psychological or physical exhaustion that occurs frequently in human service occupations (social welfare, nursing, police work, education). It is a complex and highly personalised phenomenon which can be manifested in a variety of ways from the 'simple' such as fatigue or lethargy to more complicated symptoms involving various physiological and psychological signs such as migraine, digestive disorders and even depression (Mattingly, 1981; Sharp, 1983).

Generally the process of 'burning out' occurs as follows:


Complete physical and emotional exhaustion
Growing disillusionment with work, and life in general
Self doubt and blame

These child care professionals have their break in a relaxing environment which gives them privacy and quiet from the rest of the centre.

The multi-dimensional nature of burnout

This booklet will focus upon a multi-dimensional perspective of burnout and the implications of this for the way in which early childhood centres are administered and managed. It is not intended to address the more practical implications of burnout as these have been discussed elsewhere (Lambert, 1984).

Fairley (1991) describes burnout as a multi-dimensional problem and suggests that because of this we should view it as a *process* and not a product. As such it develops within a particular social and work related context where many influences combine to create that context, such as:

- administration policies and management procedures
- the centre's relationships with parents and the community
- staff relationships and wellbeing
- the daily program
- individualisation of the program
- staff:child relationships

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- leadership style of the director
- nature and quality of the physical environment.

According to Fairley it is important to recognise the all pervasive influence of burnout and not to think of it as a one dimensional problem. Attitudes which typify a one dimensional perspective of this dilemma would be:

- the view that the staff member experiencing burnout is the one with the problem. This is somewhat akin to a 'blame the victim' approach;
- an assumption that the problem can be fixed by the single action of attending an in-service program or a course on time management;
- the use of excuses such as 'this year it's just bad luck, there are two children with behavioural problems who over time, have created the stress. Once they are sorted out things will be OK', or 'next year it'll be better, we'll have a more cooperative committee of management'.

"One dimensional views of stress offering a quick fix ... over simplify the concept [of burnout] and in some cases can result in people becoming more stressed" (Fairley, 1991: p.43). This is because as the above attitudes show, *blame becomes apportioned to individual people or events.* Further pressure is created for those concerned because the 'quick fix' approach assumes the 'wrong' can be quickly righted by taking a specific action. Imagine the further stress this is likely to cause for the individual when it does not solve the problem. Fairley dismisses one dimensional approaches as superficial attempts to attack the end product, but not the continuing process of burnout.

When someone experiences burnout

How do they feel?

How does it show?

What is likely to have caused it?

How will it affect the quality of the program?

How do they feel?

- feelings of self doubt and blame
- emotional and physical exhaustion
- a growing disillusionment with work and life

How does it show?

- lethargy
- moodiness
- absenteeism
- inadequate sleep

- professional boredom
- poor professional identity
- mental and emotional exhaustion
- disregard for any professional development
- easily threatened by unexpected changes at work

What is likely to have caused it?

- low self esteem
- poor health and/or inadequate diet
- complexity of the caregiver's role
- lack of professional support networks
- social attitudes that delegate low status to those who work with young children
- inadequate work conditions that do not measure up to the standard of training

How will it affect the quality of the program?

- program is non-stimulating, repetitive and mechanical
- preoccupation is with routines and rules rather than relationships with children and parents
- commitment to children and parents is not there
- little preparation or planning of program, an ad hoc approach

High quality programs like this one should offer quiet, personalised moments between staff and children.

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Using a multi-dimensional approach to identify some likely causes of burnout

Having considered how burnout is manifested, one needs to look beyond such surface descriptions in order to identify the spheres of influence in the workplace which are most likely to be the cause. A multi-dimensional perspective of burnout would take into account the ecological nature of early childhood settings, and must therefore contribute to a better understanding of individual centres and their unique needs. This means that it would enable recognition of *all likely spheres of influence* and the ways in which these interact with each other to affect anyone who has reason to be in a particular early childhood centre. Generally, these spheres of influence could be identified as follows:

Let us consider the impact of each of these spheres of influence on early childhood personnel and the possible ways in which they may contribute to burnout.

Administration and management

- When administration and management styles are closed rather than open they can contribute directly to work related stress (Mattingly, 1981). 'Closed' here refers to procedures and policies which are autocratic and inflexible. As such they lock out caregivers from the decision making process—even when those decisions may directly affect their daily work with children—and render them powerless and ineffectual. Under these conditions one must expect the interest and motivation of the employee to wane (Fairley, 1991; Randall and Scott, 1988).
- On the other hand, supportive and democratic leadership, genuine opportunities for collaborative decision making and regular feedback from senior staff to other staff members have been identified as factors which contribute to high morale amongst educators (Hart and Conn, 1992). They must also contribute to improved teamwork, a necessary component of work in an early childhood centre.

- The director is both a link and mediator among the management committee, staff, parents and the community. In order to promote cohesion and commitment among these different groups she/he needs to develop the complex skills of advisor, liaison person, initiater of new ideas, communicator and sensitive, yet competent staff leader.

The wellbeing of staff

- Early childhood staff tend to place very high expectations upon themselves and feel that there is a constant need to prove the worth of the work they do. This is probably fuelled by public attitudes of cynicism about work which it is claimed, merely involves 'playing with kids all day', the lack of time available for serious program planning, preparation or evaluation, and sometimes, the lack of regular opportunities for in-service programs or other kinds of professional development. This dilemma causes a serious dislocation to occur between professional expectations and the reality of the social, political and economic world we work in.
- Because of the compassionate nature of their work, many caregivers continue to think about and feel the effects of the day's events even after they leave the centre. More so for those who do not have hobbies or interests that are totally different to their work.
- If centre staff do not support one another in both good and bad times then combating burnout will be made more difficult. Staff members need to be actively encouraged to work as a supportive network. This could simply mean being ready to listen sympathetically, offering moral support or praising a co-worker when something they have planned for has been successful. Oddly enough caregivers may often think these kinds of things but never get around to saying them, or do not have the time to say them. Of course directors need to actively participate in this process and actually model these strategies on a regular basis. We are aware of the influence of positive reinforcement in fostering intrinsic motivation in children but we need to remember the principle in relation to early childhood staff themselves.

Directors with a democratic management style can always find time to share information and ideas with their staff.

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Staff:child/staff:parent relationships

- Constant physical tiredness frequently occurs when one experiences burnout. Due to this, a state of continual listlessness or apathy about one's work develops along with an increasingly clinical attitude towards children.
- A worn out caregiver will tend to 'opt out' by supervising children from a distance thus avoiding direct interactions, or by remaining at quiet activities such as the library area, for far longer than is appropriate.
- Often exhausted staff focus on *controlling* children rather than using more appropriate strategies to encourage children to make a responsible role in regulating their own behaviour. Activities and routines may become regimented and dominated by adult goals so that things can be done quickly and quietly. The sad irony here however, is that this merely serves to increase the children's reliance upon adult directions and involvement which must in turn, surely add to the caregiver's exhaustion.
- Staff who have 'had it' often feel threatened by parental contact, or simply consider it as an extra activity which they do not have time for. Consequently parental relationships are either frictional or non existent.

Quality of the program

- Exhausted caregivers are less able to develop alternative strategies to cope with the lack of time available for planning, preparing and evaluating programs. Consequently it becomes easier to give up and rely upon gimmick activities such as craft activities like egg carton caterpillars, or enforced curriculum themes where the aim is to keep children amused and quiet—such as having a 'red' week or a 'winter' week. Dramatic play, sand or blocks often provide good examples of play areas which become sterile and provide only for repetitive play at a very basic level because the caregiver has become too tired to vary these areas and plan for them to actively challenge development.
- Daily plans for the whole group become mechanised and inflexible. Spontaneous changes in response to the changing needs of the group do not occur. A sunny day which unexpectedly occurs in a week of rainy weather is therefore not capitalised upon because to do so would mean changing the original *indoor* plan for the day! Slowly, the daily program loses its flexibility and sensitivity to the group's needs.
- Caregivers experiencing burnout often lose sight of the individual needs of children and relate to the group as if it is a single personality. Because of this, the caregiver's relationships with children become somewhat distant or mechanical.
- Routines and rules become the order of the day. Routine times seem to provide opportunities for the caregiver to stay back and not get too involved with children on a one-to-one basis. Packing away and cleaning up become more desirable ways of spending one's time.
- Because little or no program planning occurs neither does evaluation, either of individual children's progress or of the program as a whole. Therefore any sound justification for the program fades due to the fact that the basis for future planning no longer exists.

Using a multi-dimensional approach to identify constructive ways of combating burnout

Earlier we identified some likely spheres of influence which affect the process of 'burning out' in work that involves young children. Let us now use these possible causes of stress, to develop ideas for a constructive approach to counter the problem of burnout. In order to better understand the multi-dimensional viewpoint it is useful to compare both multi and one dimensional solutions in attempting this task. This has been presented in summary form in the following tables. To do so provides a clearer illustration of Fairley's argument that one dimensional solutions are inappropriate because they only offer an immediate quick fix and often do not seriously address underlying causes. The importance of the director's role will also be acknowledged.

Stress inducing factors relating to administration and management: Comparison of one dimensional and multi dimensional solutions

Priority for directors

To empower and inform staff by

(i) actively sharing administrative and other professional information; and

(ii) including staff in the process of decision making and policy development.

Factors

Autocratic leadership, inflexible, ritualised administrative procedures.

All staff relationships become depersonalised, especially from director to staff.

Staff meetings or other forms of information sharing are brief, digressive or often cancelled for odd unimportant reasons.

Important issues and problems which arise are avoided and rarely solved or rushed through at the last minute. A 'crisis management' approach.

One dimensional solutions

Director attempts to hold regular staff meetings, staff are allowed to attend on a rotational basis.

Multi-dimensional solutions

Director develops a range of ways for regularly sharing professional information with staff in written and verbal forms, formally and informally.

Director shares administrative issues with staff well before decisions need to be made.

Director uses upon, collaborative approaches for solving problems and centre issues where all staff can contribute or choose to be involved.

If it is possible to hold staff meetings, director supports staff attendance by arranging a rotational system of time release.

Director develops specific agendas before staff meetings, *with* staff.

Director uses a democratic leadership style including the promotion and recognition of individual staff, e.g. delegates according to staff preferences and abilities.

Stress inducing factors relating to the wellbeing of staff: Comparisons of one dimensional and multi-dimensional solutions

Priority for directors

To actively and regularly support the professional self image of individual staff members.

Factors

Staff discord, little cohesion

Few or no long term goals for career advancement. Low professional self image.

Feeling of powerlessness in the work place.

Lack of motivation.

Little pleasure or satisfaction experienced at work.

One Dimensional Solutions

Director 'talks' to staff member concerned, places ownership of the problem with that person. Short term measures are suggested such as taking recreational leave.

Multi-dimensional Solutions

Director actively develops personalised relations with all staff members on an ongoing basis.

Director remains aware of the professional development of individual staff members, continually suggests and supports new initiatives.

Staff are actively encouraged to become a self supporting,morale building network using encouragement, praise and moral support with each other. Modelled by the director.

Democratic leadership. Director consults and collaborates with staff for the development of new policies, management decisions, reports, submissions, etc.

Director ensures an open invitation exists for interested staff to attend management committee meetings and encourages staff involvement or at least regularly reports back to staff following these meetings.

Stress inducing factors relating to staff:child/staff:parent relationships: Comparisons of one dimensional and multi-dimensional solutions

Priority for directors

To create a supportive and relaxed environment which liberates the individual personalities of staff members, children and parents.

Factors

Staff member does not seem to enjoy being with the children. Exhibits avoidance strategies, e.g. becomes overly involved in routine times, tidying up, etc.

An increasingly detached clinical attitude to children develops. A tendency to label children, discipline' them more.

Treatment of the group as a whole unit. Little recognition of the diversity of needs, abilities or cultures.

Staff member takes the worries of work home, spends Sunday dreading Monday.

Only superficial contact with parents, can't be bothered.

Staff member feels enslaved to the children yet increases their dependency on him/her by becoming more dominating.

One Dimensional Solutions

Director places ownership of the problem with the staff member. Talks with him/her about how to improve interaction style with children.

Director passes on relevant professional literature, supports staff member's attendance at conferences. No follow-up.

Multi-dimensional Solutions

Director activates self support networks among staff, e.g. let a colleague deal with a difficult child for an afternoon or greet families upon arrival. (Aim is to provide small spots of time release, for all staff to benefit.)

Director ensures staff take morning and afternoon tea breaks out of the playroom (more important in long day care). Has newspapers, magazines in tea room and encourages non-work related discussions during breaks.

Director shows an interest in the individuality of staff members thereby encouraging positive personal development and modelling a 'peer support' approach.

Director collaborates with individual staff members on a continuing basis to identify their current professional needs and how to best address them.

Staff need to develop strategies to 'leave work behind' and structure the transition from home to work accordingly, e.g. visit the gym, window shopping ,coffee with a friend, shower and change clothes upon reaching home (Mattingly, 1981).

Staff need to consider how to use leisure and holiday times so as to receive maximum benefits. People experiencing burnout often find their weekends or holidays are wasted and seem frittered away.This adds to the disappointment of having to return to work.

The extent to which children can function independently should be re-examined. Greater behaviours of self reliance should be fostered.

Stress inducing factors relating to program quality: Comparisons of one dimensional and multi-dimensional solutions

Priority for directors

To support and assist staff to take an active role in renewing theoretical bases, testing theory, applying it to practice and evaluating outcomes.

Factors

Little variation in program and range of learning experiences offered. Rigid and repetitious.

Little forward planning or preparation. Little or no evaluation. Everything is done 'on the run'.

Individual needs of the children are not recognised. The whole group is simply treated as a single personality.

One Dimensional Solutions

Director places ownership of the problem on staff member. 'Talks' to him/her, defines the problem and dominates suggestions for improvement.

Director passively encourages professional development by passing on relevant literature, encouraging attendance at relevant workshops but provides no follow-up.

Multi-dimensional Solutions

A continuing process of collaboration and empowerment of staff, actively supported by director as follows:

- Development of systems of rotational time release to enable program planning to occur out of the playroom.
- Staff are supported in attempts to apply new professional knowledge to their work.
- Director regularly gives feedback to individual staff, acknowledging their skills and successes.
- Management policies and practices are developed (with staff, director and management committee) which identify priorities and strategies for supporting the professional development of staff on a continuing basis.

- Director supports staff professional development by passing on relevant literature and encouraging in-service provision, e.g. visits to other centres. Assists staff to evaluate the usefulness of these things and meaningfully apply them to practice. Conclusion or outcomes are shared with all staff.
- Director supports the professional self image of staff by sharing information about the field, e.g. funding, political, economic issues.

Conclusion

Clearly burnout is a serious problem. Professionals involved in human services such as child care need to have an intelligent understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of burnout in order to beat it. Ongoing and constructive strategies need to be developed to prevent burnout occurring because once it occurs, all one can do is merely react passively to it rather than manage it effectively. These strategies should become enshrined and incorporated into each early childhood centre's philosophy and administrative procedures. Prevention rather than cure is a necessary attitude here.

Most importantly we should remember:

Burnout is not a sickness

Burnout is not a punishable offence

Burnout is not a disability

Burnout is not a product

Burnout is a process which occurs over time and which involves all aspects of a centre's functioning, namely:

- The director's relationship with staff. Are these relationships warm, supportive, individualised and ongoing?
- The daily administration of the centre. Is there a democratic management style, is information openly shared and discussed before decisions need to be made?
- Children's relationships with staff. Do staff and children continually enjoy moments of spontaneity and humour? Do staff members continually seek one-to-one teaching interactions with children?
- Parents' relationships with staff. Do staff initiate daily conversations with parents, or merely respond to approaches by parents?
- The staff's relationships. Do the staff work as a self supporting team, do genuine friendships exist? Do individual staff members take responsibility for articulating their own needs, and constructively working towards these goals?
- The physical environment. Is the centre well equipped and resourced or, at least, striving towards that goal?

- The early childhood field in Australia. Are professional in-service opportunities continually available? Is it an active field generating new knowledge, initiatives and policies, thus providing a motivating image for in-field personnel? Is it a high profile field, constantly marketing itself to public and political eyes?

By developing a multi-dimensional approach in creating a positive work environment, early childhood centres will be actively sustaining professional development rather than undermining it. In this way the field demonstrates how it can successfully manage its own professionalism in the workplace.

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